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Consoling Ghosts: Stories of Medicine and Mourning from Southeast Asians in Exile

JEAN M. LANGFORD

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, vii + 263p.

Consoling Ghosts focuses on how Southeast Asians in the United States—Khmer from Cambodia, and Hmong, Kmhmu, and Lao from Laos; all refugee emigrants from US wars in the region—engage with death, ghosts, spirits, and souls. Jean Langford's study was initiated when the research unit of a hospital in the United States hired her to interview Southeast Asian emigrants about their ideas concerning death. The idea was that each ethnic group had its unique ideas about death, spirits, and such and that the hospital stood to benefit from knowing the key to each culture. The reader does not learn the details of that initial research (location, duration, or results). Instead, the book is a rich exploration that draws on Langford's change in focus. She found no particular value in the quest for ethnically specific cultures, and shifted to her own study of how people manage the ethics of life and death.

The Southeast Asian materials come from interviews—aided by translators fluent in the four Southeast Asian languages—and the ethnographic literature on the region. These are framed by people's engagement with hospital and hospice care, particularly the repeated frustrations generated by the expert management of death that precludes Southeast Asian engagements with the dying person, the dead body, and the soul of the dead. The material is interspersed with western theory (Sigmund Freud on the uncanny, Michel Foucault on biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben on thanatopolitics, and so on) and Jean Langford's own experiences of death and loss. The book's

sometimes-heavy academic tone is balanced, between chapters, by poetry; Kmhmu ritual chants, more self-conscious Southeast Asian émigré reflections on war and exile, and a western doctor's reflections involving some Southeast Asian patients. "By evoking the possibility of haunting, emigrants call spirits as witnesses to violations of the dead in wartime Asia that resonate with similar violations within U.S. institutions. Rather than read the violations of the dead as metaphorical of violence against the living, I understand them as metonymic of a pervasive tendency within thanatopolitical regimes (in which I include war and state terror alongside medicine and mortuary science) to foreclose social interchange between living and dead" (p. 4).

Chapter 1 brings up the importance of dealing with ghosts of war, through interaction, ritual, and exchange. This is in sharp contrast to the prevailing focus on truth-telling and reconciliation as the adequate closure to wartime. In the stories that Langford heard from Laos and Cambodia there was an excess of suffering and death. No one appears consoled by telling the stories. Instead, the suffering that the Southeast Asian wars triggered appears accentuated "by the everyday violence of minoritization, poverty, and social fragmentation in the present" (p. 47). Chapter 2 introduces ideas of place spirits (*neak ta*, *phi ban*) and various creatures on the borders of animality. Such discussions never stray too far into ethnographic detail and instead trigger strings of theoretical associations: were-tigers and water serpents evoke Agamben on "bare life," Derrida on stealthy wolves, and Deleuze and Guattari on "becoming-animal" (pp. 65–70). In one recollection, a log hit a boat carrying people across the Mekong River as they fled Laos at the end of war. The teller of the event was eerily aware of the power of *phi-ban* place spirits, but for Langford it occasions recall of what Sigmund Freud said of the uncanny and what Dipesh Chakrabarty observed regarding the chance of encountering spirits in modern life (p. 71). But in the context of state violence even spirits suffered; interviewees from both Cambodia and Laos mentioned that the spirits communicated their inability to protect their constituents when Buddhist monks and various spirit mediums were being harassed and persecuted by the authorities (p. 73).

Chapters 3 and 4 bring out various dimensions of how hospitals in the United States control death and constrain how people can engage with it, such as by separating family members from the dying person and insisting on full disclosure of terminal diagnosis to the patient in ways that are disagreeable within Southeast Asian communities. These dynamics have created mistrust among many emigrant communities, and the study brings out some fundamental tensions between the negotiation of soul-stuff and the emphasis on individual autonomy and rational decision making. The "cultural" framework of much hospital work does not get characterized as just another perspective; biomedical control takes its own rationality for granted. Langford's study shows some of the cultural presuppositions of Euroamerican engagements with death and mourning, including an expectation of a soul that is in the body during life and leaves at death. Southeast Asian notions of souls and the need to tend to them, sometimes to call them back, and then to send them on at death rest on different premises. Death in one scheme leads to loss and bereavement and in the

other, to a funeral ceremony that may go on for days and is in part intended to reorient a soul now that it is no longer among the living.

Souls, ghosts, and exchanges are prominent in chapters 5, 6, and 7. What emerges in these chapters is a set of related ideas that crosscut any difference in ethnic culture. There are various Southeast Asian commonalities that the anthropological focus on ethnic specificities has often ignored. Langford's point is not to reassert areal anthropology but rather to juxtapose Southeast Asian materials with Euroamerican ones to examine bioethics and alternative engagements with life and death. In the aftermath of Asian wars and in the contemporary US context, the Southeast Asian dead appear cut off "from a reassuring participation in daily life, too often inconsolable and therefore without the power to console" (p. 207). The study strikes various balances among Southeast Asian worlds, contemporary western lives, medical practice, and academic orientations, including a welcome move to use Southeast Asian ideas about souls, spirits, and were-animals to put western theory in its place, regarding the recognition of "concrete socialities of living and dead [and the occasional] violation of those socialities" (p. 165).

In the afterword, on the status of ghosts, Langford offers creative play on the binaries of ghosts and guests, and ghosts and ancestors; "the literality of the ghost pulls at certain central thread of biopolitical theory, tending to unravel it" (p. 215). She is clear and sympathetic to the need to engage with the dead on terms other than the predominant Euroamerican one. While she tends to highlight how hospitals assert particular measures of control over life and death, some of the characters in her study suggest alternatives. One is a certain Dr. Stoltz who has long worked with Southeast Asian patients. With his Southeast Asian-language interpreters he has arrived at various creative ways to sidestep the confines of biomedical culture and its discursive regimes of control, in ways that have often surprised him. New options emerge when doctor and patient exchange messages that cannot be translated directly and people instead have to negotiate their differences toward an outcome that somehow facilitates each side toward a positive and agreeable goal (pp. 40–51, 204, 214–215). To me, these improvised balancing acts offered an unexpected parallel to the Southeast Asian engagements with souls and ghosts that Langford describes and analyzes.

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Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy

ANDREW WALKER

Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012, xiii + 277p.

This is a very important book for understanding political conflict in contemporary Thailand. The